The Cure for Death: Fantasies of Longevity and Immortality in Speculative Fiction

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Abstract

Anxiety about old age and mortality, a constant and cross-cultural reaction to the finitude of life and evanescence of youth, has fed multiple fantasies of immortality that frequently also incorporate the triumphant regeneration of the body. But while in the nineteenth century these fantasies, ungrounded on any scientific possibility, focused on the social and psychological disorientation and disruptions of the defeat of death and ageing, the late twentieth and twenty-first century fictions, invoking possible extrapolations of contemporary scientific and technological knowledge, have used the tropes of immortality and the rejuvenated body to serve either dystopian visions related with problematics of distribution of power, or to signify the utopian techno-optimist promises of trans-humanism.

This paper will discuss these creative imaginings of the defeat of embodied decay using three speculative novels that position themselves as signposts along this spectrum: Walter Bessant's *The Inner House* (1888), a conservative anti-utopian reflection on the social and cultural costs of immortality; Bruce Sterling's *Holy Fire* (1996), a cyberpunk novel where access to permanent health and youth acts as a social divider between deserving elites and the masses condemned to grow old; and Cory Doctorow's *Down and out in the Magic Kingdom* (2003), a post-singularity satirical novel where in a post-scarcity future society all enjoy the possibilities of body and life plasticity.

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1. Why were we born if it wasn't forever?

In *Declining to Decline*, published more than twenty years ago, Margaret Gullette asserts that "age remains an impoverished concept" in much of the theorizing about discourse, "hidden in its supposed foundation in the body", its constructiveness obscured by a master narrative of decline that sees ageing as ahistorical and pre-discursive, reduced to the protocols of the natural (pp. 201-202). Since these reflections on what Gullette characterized as the "Infancy of Age Theory", much work has been done to cast into doubt that master narrative, questioning whether "decline becomes visible and speakable because the body ages" or because, as she suggests, "our culture finds it necessary for subjects that are young to be seen and be said to be aging" (1997, p. 201). In parallel, our understanding of what philosopher Martha Nussbaum has recently called the "projective disgust" towards the ageing body, has exposed how much of it is, in reality, a manifestation of the anguish caused by the knowledge that

> aging is the only disgust-stigma category into which every one of us will inevitably move, if we live long enough. (2017, p. 112)

But unlike other variations of stigma attached to identity-based out-groups, grounded on fantasies of difference based on racial, gender, sexual or ability hierarchies, there is an inescapable reality to ageing in that it is taken to be a precursor and a visible sign of mortality. In the same way as youth is a value dependent on its own evanescence, ageing cannot be separated from the radical transience of life, signifying the certainty of the interruption of the project of making ourselves, summarised by Eugene Ionesco´s King Berenger's desperate question "Why was I born if it wasn't forever?"

Equating the ageing body with anguish about death is, of course, a somewhat restrictive proposition. First, it assumes, somewhat uncritically, the familiar axiom that it is the end of life that gives it significance, and that death itself (as separate from the process of dying) is undesirable and undesired. Philosophers like Anthony Brueckner and John Martin Fisher, revising the asymmetrical attitude to non-existence identified by Epicurus and Lucretius, have discussed why death, which no one has personally experienced and should, therefore, be categorised as an "experiential blank" (2009, p. 27), is perceived as bad for the individual who dies in ways that pre-natal non-existence is not, even if we have no expectations of any kind of afterlife. Answering the Epicureans' arguments against the fear of death, they turn to Thomas Nagel's view that posthumous non-existence is perceived as a privation of experienced good things in ways that pre-natal non-existence cannot be, supported by

the uncontroversial and commonsensical awareness that if most humans probably regret not living longer, the same kind of regret is not usually projected into a desire for having been born earlier. Secondly, besides the obvious fact that one may die before one's body falters, fantasy projections of an ideal life without death usually also preclude aged bodies. No one would envy the Struldbrugs of Luggnagg, the immortals in *Gulliver's Travels* who, though "exempt from that universal calamity of human nature" and living forever, are far from being the "happy people of a happy nation where every child hath at last a chance for being immortal" since they become senile and socially rejected, are stripped of their assets at 80 and eventually lose their memory (Swift, Part III, chapter 10). What fictions of immortality tend to project as ideal is the end of death and the competency associated with a youthful body.

The tension between these two desires – youthful vigour and a transcendence of what Swift called the calamity of human nature – explains why most fictions of longevity, predicated either on the stopping of the ageing process or the creation of methods of rejuvenation, also aspire to immortality and why narratives of immortality also incorporate the triumphant defeat of the destiny of the biological body. These linkages are naturally framed by the horizons of the possibility of a specific timeframe. In the Anglophone tradition, fantasies of immortality emerging in the nineteenth century, when this project could only be imagined by the introduction of some unexplained almost magical *novum*, question the desirability of the defeat of ageing and death focusing mostly on the disorientation and disruptions brought about by these inversions of the natural, as is the case of Mary Shelley's "The Mortal Immortal" (1833) and Walter Bessant's *The Inner House* (1888). Some of these preoccupations also emerge in some late twentieth and twenty-first-century science fiction, framed by the techno-optimism of the singularity theory and by the contemporary debate about the post-human condition, indebted to the inheritance of the Cartesian dualities of cyberpunk. Here the tropes of immortality and the rejuvenated body serve to interrogate both the problematics of distribution of power created by access to immortality and issues related to the survival of the sense of selfhood. This paper discusses and teases out these approaches by contrasting the imagination of immortality in a nineteenth-century text, the *Inner House*, with recent science fiction novels that exemplify different dynamics of post-singularity immortality: Bruce Sterling's *Holy Fire* (1996); *Accelerando* by Charles Stross (2005); and *Down and out in the Magic Kingdom* (2003) by Cory Doctorow.

2. Living after the Great Discovery

If in Mary Shelley's short story "The Mortal Immortal" (1833) the protagonist's defeat of death is unintended and personally disastrous, as Winzy, the alchemist's apprentice who drinks an immortality potion thinking it is the cure for love, comes to see the results of his eternal youth as a destroyer of his personal happiness and family harmony, *The Inner House,* published 55 years later, extends the investigation of the consequences of immortality from the domain of the personal and the confessional to that of the social and the political.

The narrative opens at the moment the discovery of "the Prolongation of Vital Energy" is revealed in a lecture at the Royal Institution given by Professor Schwarzbaum, who intends to donate the anti-ageing chemical formula to "the world". We soon realise that "the world" will diverge from the generous discoverer in two significant ways. First, while the professor explains to his audience that the medicine is intended to "prolong life only until a person has enjoyed everything they desire", expecting that after two or three centuries "you would, of your own accord put aside the aid of science" and, contented and resigned, "sink into the Tomb" (p. 11), when the story jumps hundreds of years into the future we understand that "the Great Discovery" has been used exclusively as an instrument of immortality.

Secondly, when we visit that future, we understand that the discriminatory clauses proposed by the professor, namely that longevity should be offered only to "the salt of the earth, the flower of mankind" and that those whose

> lives could never become anything but a burden to themselves and to the rest of the world – the crippled, the criminal, the poor, the imbecile, the incompetent, the stupid, and the frivolous […] would live out their allotted lives and die (pp. 10-11)

had been reinterpreted and expanded. In the immediate aftermath of the discovery, all the elderly had been wiped out in the genocide known as the *Great Slaughter*, and only the young had benefitted from the Great Discovery. In the following centuries, no one had chosen to die, and no one had been born, except on the rare occasions when the state had allowed a birth to replace an accidental death. An authoritarian society, controlled by the organ known as the College of Physicians headed by an Arch Physician, had emerged, one where everyone lives by a collective schedule and acts, looks and thinks in exactly the same way. Having first taken the Arcanum, as the longevity formula is now known, at a young age (twenty-five for women and thirty for men), the citizens of the ageless and deathless utopia live without personal property, joy, curiosity or thirst for knowledge. In this world, which anticipates the nightmarish landscapes of Zamyatin's *We*, as the

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narrator[1] informs the reader, "Art, Leaning, Science – other than Physics, Biology and Medicine – all gradually decayed and died away" and the "old foolish pursuit of literature" had also been abandoned since "no longer anxious about their past or their future", these new humans were "contented to dwell in the present" (p. 28). Thus, the narrator assures us, "true happiness has been achieved" as "life has been reduced to its simplest form […] nothing to hope, nothing to fear" (p. 26) and, as the storyline suggests, nothing to feel and nothing to love. When rebellion comes, it is led by Christina, a young girl whose exceptional birth had been allowed as a replacement for one accidental death. She is allowed to live in an abandoned Art Museum no one visits, with an old man who had escaped the Great Slaughter. Having no personal memory of the past, her contact with its artistic representations in her nightly meanderings through the empty galleries awakens in the young girl a passion for the romanticised elegance of the pre-immortality days when, as the portraits suggest, there were ladies with beautiful dresses and heroic sailors and soldiers who knew they were better than other men. Sharing these imagined memories with a small group of acquaintances, former aristocrats and military men who actually remember, kindles a feeble rebellion that, having failed, leads the nostalgic group to leave the Utopia of Immortality and Equality and retreat to a faraway island to attempt to replay the roles they half remember, to live fully, with pleasure and love and then to die without regrets.

The undisguised conservative undertone of the narrative does not obfuscate this very early literary presence of a very influential trope in immortality fiction – living forever is tedious and soul-crushing. This is the proposition defended by moral philosopher Bernard Williams who, although distancing himself from the tenet that it is the inescapable reality of death that gives meaning to life, argues that immortality would be intolerable, based on the notion of continuity of the self, subject to the same unchanging desires and goals such as those one acquires in the course of a finite life; if such immortal humans retained a sense of selfhood, argues Williams, contentment would be necessarily elusive as an endless cycle "of supposedly satisfying states and activities" would prove unendurably boring to anyone who remained conscious of himself and "who had acquired a character, interests, tastes and impatiences in the course of living" (Williams, 1993, p. 87). One might argue nonetheless, as John Martin Fisher does, that these conclusions assume a sense of permanence and unchangeability of the self that rules out the possibility that a future I, while recognizably the same, might change in response to future circumstances and either acquire new interests or continue enjoying other non-"self-exhausting", repeatable pleasures (Fisher, 2009, p. 85).

In contemporary speculative fictions of immortality this paradox – how to reconcile the identity condition with the attractiveness condition (being the same and finding pleasure in a never-ending life) – has been a central problem examined from many angles. The premises they explore are obviously different; while narratives of immortality written in the nineteenth-century could not escape the shadow of the quasi-magical and unexplained fantastic defeat of the laws of biology, by the late twentieth-century the utopian mythologies of post-singularity discourses would provide a fertile terrain for imagining the transcendence of what futurist Ray Kurzweil calls our "1.0 biological bodies", over which we will gain power so that "our mortality will be in our hands" and "we will be able to live as long as we want." (Kurzweil, 2006, p. 9). This liberation of the body from its finitude and frailty is frequently imagined either as a function of medical and technological enhancement and fusion with non-biological elements or by extending the Cartesian dichotomy to imagine a self that can move away from its original "meat machine" to inhabit a plurality of disposable and redoable bodies.

3. Technoscience and posthuman lives

In *Holy Fire* (1996), Bruce Sterling distances himself from some of the cyberpunk tropes he is associated with and invests in a purely carbon-based immortality, choosing to investigate the challenges Williams so clearly identified and to revisit Bessant's agenda, bringing to the fore the new power relations and social landscapes brought about by extreme longevity and immortality.

The novel draws a late twenty-first-century world dominated by a political-medical-industrial complex devoted to the ultimate pursuit of life extension for deserving citizens, aiming to prolong life until a cure for mortality is achieved. Controlling most of the world's economy and biomedicine, employing fifteen per cent of the world's population and topping all other government expenses, it is mostly dedicated to gerontological research. In this global order, the distribution of power is measured by access to longevity. While "once upon a time having money almost guaranteed good health", now worthiness has

[1] The narrator is not a neutral observer; he is, as the reader only discovers half-way through the text, the former Suffragant (the second rank in the power hierarchy), whose narrative is a retrospective account of an episode of rebellion against the status quo which he defends ardently.

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replaced wealth (p. 49). For the undeserving, dedicated to the pursuit of "irresponsible" body-destroying pleasures, there is no escape from natural ageing and death. A medical surveillance panopticon determines each individual's worthiness; as Martin, a 96-year-old film director denied rejuvenation treatments, explains:

> when you go in for a checkup they take your blood and hair and DNA and they map every trace of every little thing you've done to yourself.

Unless you are "a little tin saint" your records, splashed "all over the net", condemn you to your biological destiny (p. 11).

If, on the other hand, you are a productive, responsible and unquestioning supporter of the medical state and have "objectively demonstrated your firm will to live" and your "tenacious approach to longevity" as demonstrated by your medical records (p. 47), you are rewarded with permanent medical upgrades and rejuvenation treatments that keep you looking and feeling youngish.

On the margins of this elite gerontocracy, pockets of non-compliers (the American Amish, for example, who cling to the natural ways) and the "real" young, struggling to be "vivacious" (that is innovative and creative), have attempted, with little success, to sustain alternative life choices outside the dominant order.

The narrative centres on the experience of Mia, a member of the elite, a 94-year-old medical economist from California, living a meticulously planned existence from which pleasure has long been eradicated. Describing herself as a post-sexual and post-womanly technochrome, she summarises her life:

> I don't have lovers […] I don't kiss anyone, I don't hug anyone, I don't cheer anyone up. (p. 16);
>
> I look at screens and study grant procedures and weight results from research programmes. (p. 13)

"I'm a functionary" she concludes. (p. 13)

This exemplary behaviour renders her the perfect candidate for the ultimate experimental treatment which will grant her biological youth, restoration of all metabolic drives and immortality – on condition she lets herself be examined and constantly medically monitored after the procedure. "You are," her doctor explains, "going to be a ninety-five-year-old woman who can look, act and feel like a twenty-year-old girl" (p. 57).

Thus the 20-year-old girl that emerges from the treatment is not exactly the youthful-looking nonagenarian woman who volunteered for it. The difference is not only located in the body but in the double-edged mind, now both old and young. While she certainly retains her sense of self, she recognises that she is not the same. She can let the old self resurface and pretend that not much has changed, but being "the Mia thing", a "meek... and accommodating bundle of habits" (p. 63), is no longer tolerable.

"Something has snapped," she recognises when contemplating her old life.

> This is not my place. This is nowhere. I can't live like this. This isn't living. I'm out of here." (p. 66).

Following the new impulsiveness and desires of the new body and new double consciousness, calling herself Maya, the once passive Mia escapes the medical surveillance team and heads to Europe, looking for "holy fire", an excitement about life and its possibilities she had never missed before.

It is when surrounded by what Teresa Magnum calls "metaphors of aging" (2002, p. 76), expressed by the centuries-old landscapes of Praha, Frankfurt and Stuttgart, that, somewhat paradoxically, Maya finds avenues of defiant self-expression in the company of communities of irreverent and bohemian young anarchic artificers who, unable to defeat the power of the artificially young, seek a kind of immortality in virtuality and occasionally find in suicide the most radical gesture of protest against the gerontocratic order.

Defying laws and social mores, experimenting new types of pleasure and sexual delectations, Maya/Mia's embodied performance of youth will eventually fall prey to the paradox identified by John Fisher Martin. Her double consciousness clashes with her newly obtained desires. Her 20-year-old self knows what her 94 years have taught her. Being both the same and not the same turns her potentially immortal life into both a continuous and a discontinuous experience. Finding no long-term satisfaction in her performance of new, liberated youth, she returns home and attempts to live disconnected from the system that gave her what she no longer feels she really wants, knowing full well that this break will mean ageing and eventually death. At the end of the novel, she finds a private and self-reflexive pleasure in photographing the processes of ageing of the Amish, a gesture of reconciliation with the natural processes of body decay and death, which she now has chosen as her future.

If *Holy Fire* projects immortality on a stable biological, if radically modifiable, body, novels which draw more directly on the Singularity metaphors tend to depend on a detachment between the mind and a body which is not only modifiable but replaceable, sometimes even projected into several serial non-atomistic modes of being. Some of these techno-utopias lack, as Steven Shaviro points out, a modicum of "existential anguish", creating naively optimistic post-human vistas (2009, p 109).

Cory Doctorow's *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* (2003) is not in that category, offering a more reflective contemplation of the promises of the technological Singularity, modulated by a

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satirical gaze. It takes the reader to a twenty-second-century post-scarcity world based on the distribution of Free Energy to all, guaranteed by a global entity known as the Bitchun Society.

Under this utopian order, basic material conditions are assured to all; there is no poverty and no economical sources of inequality, work is strictly voluntary, and a vehicle for self-expression and pleasure rather than a condition of survival, and both sickness and death have been eradicated thanks to a combination of nano-production, mind–uploading and body cloning.

In this ad-hocracy with no central authority, status is based not on money or the value of material objects but on individual reputation, represented by *Whuffie* points attributed to each individual according to their socially useful endeavours. The points are automatically known to all as individual scores are accessed via the networked brain implants all citizens have, establishing a new type of social hierarchy based on a "likeability" status. This ironic portrait is enhanced by the location of the plot, a Disney World where different groups struggle for simulacra of power based on aesthetic values and the popularity of their creations.

Involuntary death has been abolished, age is a flexible concept as one may choose the years of the body one carries, and life is as long as one wants it to be. Immortality is seen as potentially rewarding and filled with delights, as Julius, the more than 100-year-old narrator, initially describes when he mentions his many achievements – the ten languages he has learned, the three symphonies he has composed, his four doctorates, all enjoyed, by choice, in a 40-year-old looking body.

But this listing of the joys of unending possibilities notwithstanding, it is the re-visitation of Williams´ conditions for an appealing immortality that most of the novel addresses, dwelling on the double conundrum of the potential boredom of eternity and the permanence and stability of the self.

The challenges of sustaining an interesting never-ending life are assumed to be so inevitable that a solution has been provided – the practice of *deadheading*. This is best described as a temporary death from which one may re-emerge anytime one chooses as one leaves one's conscience backed up ready to unload into a fresh body should one want to try and live again. This widely used practice is recommended to those who feel they have seen all there is to see, done all there is to do and crave a permanent death.

This is the case of Keep A-Movin' Dan, a friend of Julius' who, having lived his very active long years in a 25-year-old body, looks at the long arch of eternity with panic: "I think that if I'm still alive in ten thousand years, I'm going to be crazy as hell." Asking "You really think there is going to be anything recognizably human in a hundred centuries?" he concludes,

> Me, I´m not interested in being a post-person. I´m going to wake up one day and I´m going to say, 'Well, I guess I've seen about enough' and that will be my last day. (p. 13)

When his friend Julius suggests, "why not just deadhead for a few centuries, see if there's anything that takes your fancy and if not, back to sleep for a few more?" the proposition does not appeal to Dan, who is resolved to "stop moving, stop seeking, stop kicking, and have it done with" when the day comes "when I don't have anything left to do, except stop." (p. 13)

The ironic limitations of the utopian promises of what Julius had called the "cure for death" (p. 7) does not stop here, as the text revisits the disembodied mind trope in new ways, introducing a degree of instability in the process of body assignment and mind uploading that is far from problem-free.

Early in the novel, Julius is murdered, a futile and inexplicable exercise because of the assured reversibility of the act. This is, in fact, his third death and as he admits, it is becoming increasingly easier to recover from it. "The first time I died", in a diving accident, he remembers, the process of making mind-backups was still painfully slow: "it took almost a day, and had to be undertaken at a special clinic", and people like him did not do it regularly. The memory his new body received was therefore incomplete, with a couple of weeks missing, a void hanging so heavily on his sense of "rebirth, that it had taken him almost a year to find and reinvent himself" (p. 34).

His second death, ten years after the first one, this time of a massive heart attack, could have been equally traumatic since he had been lax in backing up again, but this time he was helped by a "computer-generated précis of the events of the missing interval" and was followed by a counsellor until he felt at home again in his rebooted body (p. 35).

Armed with that experience, his casual dismissal of the experience of being killed – "Sure, I'd been murdered, but what had it cost me? A few days of "unconsciousness" while they decanted my backup into my new body" (p. 49) – hides a new concern that will come to haunt him after the procedure.

It is not that he agrees with the ontological doubts of his old friend Dan, who calls into question the sameness of his copy, clinging to the belief that "there is a difference between you and an exact copy of you" and that "being destroyed and recreated" cannot possibly be the same as "not being destroyed at all" (p. 41) since he is sure that he feels like himself, but that he is haunted by a heightened awareness of the loss of memory. If everyone's "decanting" is limited by the date of their last backup what is lost? And how can you be

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sure of the continuity of the self if something important in shaping that self might be missing, something that cannot be re-lived by mere enunciation of its factuality?

It is this idea of loss of lived time and experience that paralyses him when he begins to suffer from a radical malfunction – his mind goes off-line at unexpected times, depriving him of all the knowledge and connections it has accumulated, leaving him with "no tone in my cochlea indicating a new file in my public directory" (p. 69), no access to statistics and data.

The cause of this condition, his doctor explains, is a defect in the "brain-machine interface" installed when he was restored after his last death. Curing the malfunction would not be difficult, involving a rebooting into a new clone refreshed from his last backup, nevertheless implying the complete loss of a whole year of memories, and this he finds he cannot accept. "I was going to lose [...] it all," he reflects, "all of it, good and bad. Every moment flensed away." "I couldn't do it" (p. 126).

His refusal, based on the sense of the permanence of the self-grounded on lived emotions, inverts the notions of life and death as Julius comes to see the recommendations of his doctor and friends as an attempt to kill him in order to save him. The choice before him seems to be between a complete breakdown of his brain-machine interface, condemning him to be permanently "offline, outcast, malfunctioning" (p. 105), and the loss of the experiences he most values and that he identifies with his sense of deep identity.

Besides, with Dan planning to take a lethal injection soon, the procedure would erase his best friend completely from his memory. And who will he be if he does not remember the emotion of the existence and loss of a friendship he so values?

Torn by the options before him, he tries to escape from the responsibility of the decision by drowning himself in a lake, hoping to be refreshed without choosing it and consciously "shutting out the last years of my best friend's life" (p. 193). This pathetic attempt to "abdicate", as he puts it, fails (as he is rescued before he dies) and he is left with the impossible decision between what he sees as two kinds of quasi-death.

At the end of the novel, Dan decides not to die, opting for long-term deadheading: "I'll poke my head in every century or so, just to see what's what, but if nothing really stupendous crops up, I´ll take the long ride out," he explains (p. 204). Julius, on the other hand, decides to drop off earth and take himself to space, leaving behind his increasingly obsolete back-up and relying instead on his own words, writing "long hand a letter to the me that I'll be when it's restored into a clone somewhere, somewhen" (p. 206). This letter is the novel the reader has just finished reading, a gamble on a sense of permanence projected into a future so distant it can hardly be imagined, neither refusing nor accepting the desirability of non-death.

Sherryl Vint has argued that

> science fiction is particularly suited to exploring questions of post-human futures, since it is a discourse that allows us to concretely imagine other concepts of bodies and selves, estranging our commonplace perception of reality." (2007, p 19)

In the case of our anxieties about ageing and death, while real-life research is being done into the possibilities of extreme longevity (the Calico Longevity Lab is one of the many initiatives operating today)[2], thought-experiments such as those discussed here may be productive mechanisms to explore the consequences of our conscious and unconscious desires to transcend the limits of our existence that we cannot control. Divided between Plato's advice of acceptance, in his famous recommendation that we should "practise dying", and the scientifically grounded utopias and fantasies about the cure for death, these fictions of immortality offer us a landscape of "what ifs" that may help us work through ethical challenges of both the personal and public kind and think in new ways about the processes of our bodies.

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[2] See also the American National Academy of Medicine's Healthy Longevity Grand Challenge, and the Sens Research Foundation, headed by the controversial biomedical gerontologist Aubrey de Grey.

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